

Antigua and Barbuda

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Freedom of the Press

The constitution provides for freedoms of speech and of the press, but the government enforces those rights somewhat selectively. Despite the prime minister's commitment to repeal the criminal defamation law by May 2013, defamation remained a criminal offense at year's end, punishable by up to three years in prison. Cases are occasionally brought against journalists, and politicians often file libel suits against opposing party members. In June, a court ruled in favor of opposition lawmaker Asot Michael in his defamation case against Caribarena Printing and Publishing, which operates the online news portal Caribarena.com. The court had yet to determine the damages to be paid by the company and its owner, Ofer Shaked, who had left the country and offered no defense. Shaked claimed that he and his family had received threats after the website began reporting on a corruption scandal and Michael's alleged involvement. Separately, in February 2012, a court had ruled in favor of opposition Antigua Labour Party (ALP) leader Lester Bird in a defamation case against Prime Minister Baldwin Spencer and Crusader Radio, owned by the ruling United Progressive Party (UPP), for statements Spencer made during a 2008 campaign rally that were aired by the station. The judge awarded EC\$75,000 (US\$28,000) in damages to Bird, and declared that radio stations would be held responsible for defamatory comments made during live broadcasts without a time delay.

The 2004 Freedom of Information Act grants citizens the right to access official government documents and established a commissioner to oversee compliance, though Antiguan have complained of difficulties in obtaining information in practice. In November 2012, local and regional media associations, along with Bird and a group of prominent attorneys in the country, condemned a clause in legislation governing the Citizens by Investment program that prohibits the media from publishing or disseminating information on the initiative, with potential fines of up to EC\$10,000 (US\$3,700). The program allows Antiguan passports to be issued to foreign investors. Parliament later clarified the language of the legislation, indicating that the clause was meant merely to prevent false information from circulating before the law was passed.

Physical attacks and harassment directed at journalists occur occasionally. In March 2013, a journalist for Caribarena was shot at several times—a highly unusual event for Antigua. The journalist had been covering a cricket match and was targeted on the way out of the stadium. The Caribarena website was shut down in July for approximately two weeks after a series of alleged cyberattacks. While Shaked blamed the attacks and threats on Asot Michael—a frequent subject of the site's articles and investigative reports—no evidence was furnished in support of these claims, and investigations into the shooting and cyberattacks stalled after Shaked and his family left the country.

The islands have one daily newspaper, one biweekly paper, and more than 10 radio and television stations. These include the state-owned Antigua and Barbuda Broadcasting Service (which runs ABS TV, the only free-to-air television service, and ABS Radio), the UPP's Crusader Radio, the pro-ALP ZDK Liberty Radio, and the independent Observer Radio. The ALP has complained that the government-run media do not offer equal access to the opposition, and the International Press Institute (IPI) noted in April 2013 that the ABS channels tend to "serve as a mouthpiece for the government in power," failing to provide balanced viewpoints. Most private outlets are owned by firms affiliated with either the current government or its predecessor, which influences their content. In October 2012, radio journalist Percival Simon was banned from ZDK, owned by the Bird family, for openly supporting Bird's opponent, Gaston Browne, in an ALP leadership contest. There is one cable television company, and the country also receives broadcasts

from a pan-Caribbean radio network, the Caribbean SuperStation (CSS), based in Trinidad. There are no government restrictions on the internet, which was accessed by 63 percent of the population in 2013.

The global financial crisis has negatively affected the country's media. Due to an increase in the price of paper, the *Observer* daily raised its advertising rates in December 2010, but did not change its newsstand price. A number of businesses have since been unwilling to advertise with the *Observer*, and the company has suffered. Also in 2010, Antigua and Barbuda's only other daily newspaper, *Antigua Sun*, was forced to close down for financial reasons.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Partly Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

39

Legal Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

9

Political Environment

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

17

Economic Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

13